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AUTHOR Nash, Gary B.; Dunn, Ross E.
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ABSTRACT

This position paper offers a review of the recent criticisms levelled against the products of the National History Standards committees and addresses those criticisms. The four issues of controversy suggested for consideration when examining the U.S. history or world history volumes include: (1) Who wrote these books? (2) Are the standards "politically correct"? (3) Are the standards grim and gloomy? and (4) Are the standards going to be the new official history? The paper suggests that much of the criticism is political in nature and predicts that educators will be the ultimate arbiters of the history standards books. As with any other curriculum materials, teachers will consult the guidelines, assess their value, draw from them what they find useful, adapt them to their lesson plans, and leave the rest aside. (EH)

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THE NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS CONTROVERSY

by

Gary B. Nash and Ross E. Dunn

National Center for History in the Schools
University of California, Los Angeles

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THE NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS CONTROVERSY

BY

GARY B. NASH AND ROSS E. DUNN

A seventh grade teacher in San Diego, preparing a set of lessons on Islamic civilization, checks his plans against the *National Standards for World History* to see if he may have missed an important topic. A team of teachers in Milwaukee draws upon the national standards as a resource for developing social studies guidelines in their own district. The headmaster of an independent school in Virginia consults with a third grade teacher about using the standards to teach a unit on machines in history. A university in Seattle sponsors a forum to discuss the significance of the standards for history teaching and scholarship.

Even as controversy about the new national standards for history rages in the press, the popular talk shows, and even the halls of Congress, social studies educators across the country are ordering copies of the three standards volumes and quietly putting them to work in their classrooms. Whether or not the standards are ever certified by the National Educational Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), which President Clinton has yet to appoint, they are going to be available to teachers, who simply want good resource material. The Clinton Department of Education, like the Bush administration, has repeatedly declared that national standards for all the disciplines are to be regarded as purely voluntary, never to be federally forced on the states. Hostile critics have declared that they want to see the history standards "deep sixed." But even if the federal government wished to comply, and it would be an act of aggression against American teachers to take such a position, there exist no laws or bureaucratic machinery for stopping teachers and schools from making practical, productive use of these guidelines. Nor would such censorship be even plausible in a country that prides itself on having no ministry of education to dictate curriculum.

As the debate has made clear, the national history standards were created in response to gubernatorial, congressional and presidential mandates to ensure that young Americans demonstrate competency over "challenging subject matter" in the core academic disciplines. The National Endowment for the Humanities funded the National Center for History in the Schools in 1991 to develop these rigorous standards in cooperation with a broad spectrum of educators and public interest organizations. The resulting guidelines—*National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience* and *National Standards for World History: Exploring Paths to the Present*—parallel new standards that have been released for math, civics, geography, social studies, and the arts. Standards projects for science, economics, and English are at various stages of development. All of these efforts have the shared goal of providing American youth with a comprehensive, challenging, and thought-provoking education that is the equal of other industrialized countries.

No party to the controversy has argued that children should not learn history in school. Indeed, surveys of parents show that a huge majority wants teachers and students to take aim at high plateaus of achievement. Most Americans would undoubtedly agree that students should take several years of classes in history, confront difficult subject matter, read primary source documents, learn to think and analyze, do plenty of writing, and take responsibility for perpetuating the collective memories of our nation and our world.

Moreover, even the unfriendliest critics of the history standards have either ignored or seen fit to commend certain of their features:

- A new framework for critical thinking and active learning that recommends five categories of skill: 1) chronological thinking; 2) historical comprehension; 3) historical analysis and interpretation; 4) historical research capabilities; and 5) historical issues-analysis and decision-making. This framework makes a clarion call for active learning and discourages teaching that relies on rote memorization of information divorced from contexts of historical meaning.

- A wealth of reference to primary documents that will encourage students to read and hear authentic voices from the past.

- Hundreds of ideas for incorporating literature, art, architecture, music, and other humanistic disciplines into the history curriculum, thereby introducing students to the humane substance of past ages, peoples, and cultural perspectives.

Why then has such a storm arisen over the United States and world history standards? (There has been virtually no contention over *Expanding Children's World in Time and Space*, the standards for K-4 children.) The attacks have in fact focused not on the ways that children become better historical thinkers but on those perennial targets of cultural rancor—political correctness and multiculturalism. As soon as the standards appeared, a small band of critics led by Lynne Cheney, chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities under President Bush, decided that these topical guidelines were susceptible to charges of multicultural excess and left-wing revisionism. Not teachers or historians but talk show hosts and newspaper oped pundits have tried to link the standards in the public mind to extreme forms of "new history," hoisting them up as a useful political symbol of all that is wrong with the schools, the universities, the NEH, and the "liberal establishment." Like taggers in the night, these critics have scrawled "politically correct" across the standards. Since these documents do not in fact manifest serious evidence of educational radicalism, the adversaries launched a campaign to misrepresent them, concocting a scary, fanciful version of the guidelines that does not remotely exist. Their main tactic has been to cull out particular passages or words from the standards, twist them out of shape, then repeat the distortions over and over in the national media.

The assault on the standards has been successful enough to attract even the attention of the U.S. Senate. On January 18 that body passed by a vote of 99 to 1 a non-binding resolution calling on the yet to be appointed National Education Standards and Improvement Council to disapprove the history standards developed by the National Center for History and specifying that the recipients of funds for any future project "should have a decent respect for the contributions of western civilization, and United States history, ideas and institutions, to the increase of freedom and prosperity in the world." The hostile critics immediately vaunted the Senate action as a triumph for their cause, proclaiming that even the likes of Ted Kennedy and Carole Mosley-Braun were opposed to the standards. In fact the Senate action was a Democratic-led tactical move to prevent language undermining the independence of NESIC and the National Education Goals Panel from entering into law as an amendment to the unfunded mandate reform bill. Congress had conducted no hearings on the history standards, and the floor debate was limited mainly to Sen. Slade Gorton of Washington and two other legislators making one-sided attacks using scripts undoubtedly supplied by the Cheney forces. Senator Pell called the Gorton amendment "an unwarranted intrusion into what is basically a private effort." Moreover in early February the Senate deleted the anti-standards resolution from the bill, revealing in effect that the issue mattered much less than the critics wished to presume. Sen. Patty Murray, Gorton's colleague from Washington, admitted that she had not yet seen the standards when the resolution came up and explained that her vote for it was an effort to put the issue aside and get back to the debate on unfunded mandates (*The Seattle Times*, Feb 1).

Jean Johnson, a teacher who worked on the World History Standards wrote these comments about the Senate's action: "After working on these standards that took more than two years to develop, and experiencing first-hand the constant give and take, discussions, and compromises that went into the consensus on the final product, we affirm the democratic process more than ever. Those of us involved in the standards project remain deeply respectful of that process. Somehow we assumed that the inclusive and thoughtful deliberations in which we were involved would continue and include the way the Senate of the United States considered the issue. Yet without any serious debate and seemingly relying on a few vocal critics whose criticism, from our viewpoint, were emotionally charged half-truths that do not accurately represent what is actually in the standards, you voted overwhelmingly to reject the proposed standards." (From a letter to her Senator: Jean Elliott Johnson, History Teacher, Friends Seminary (1974-1994), January 25, 1995)

However teachers may perceive these Senate actions, thousands of them, together with parents and school officials, are now reading the standards. They are finding just how unjust the hostile criticisms are and how in fact the standards lead the way to livelier history classrooms at all levels of public education. Here are four issues in the controversy to consider when examining the U.S. or world history volumes.

Who wrote these books? The hostile critics have attempted to portray the writers of the standards as a tight band of ultra-liberal, 60s-generation professors, centered at UCLA and allied with a national network of radical post-modernists. John Leo, a pundit allied with Cheney, proclaimed darkly that the standards got "to be so bad" because "most of the power, and control of the drafting press, stayed in the hands of academics with a heavy ideological agenda." (*U.S. News and World Report*, Feb. 6, 1995.) Leo's interpretation of the development process is in fact imaginary. These standards represent a historic collaboration among teachers in public and independent schools, curriculum specialists, and college historians. Carol Gluck, a scholar of Japanese history at Columbia University who took part in creating the world history standards, has aptly noted that only in a democratic society could anybody imagine curriculum being created by such a broad national consensus. Consensus, she further points out, is not national unanimity. But working for 32 months, producing five drafts of each book, reporting to a national council of 29 members that met on eleven weekends for a total of 23 days, the National Center for History managed to obtain broad consensus indeed. Dozens of veteran school teachers from places like Middlebury, Vermont; Soldotna, Alaska; and Wheat Ridge, Colorado helped draft the documents. Thirty-three educational and public interest organizations participated, including the Lutheran Schools of the Missouri Synod, the Council for Islamic Education, the National Council on Economic Education, the Native American Heritage Commission, the National Alliance of Black School Educators, the National Catholic Educational Association, and many more. Far from being the work of a "secret group," as Rush Limbaugh proclaimed them to be, the standards are the product of a genuinely national forum in which ultimately hundreds of educators pored over, disputed, negotiated, revised, and refined the documents that appeared last fall.

Here are a few comments from those who devoted their summers and weekends to writing and revising the books. John Pyne, West Milford Public Schools, New Jersey, and Gloria Sesso, Half Hollow Hills School, New York, write: "As two of the history teachers involved in the writing of the National U.S. History Standards, we are appalled that we have become the object of a virulent ideological attack by Lynne Cheney and her cohorts (Letters, *New York Times*, February 2, 1995). Scouring the hundred of specific student activities that we helped draft, they have made a national issue out of perhaps half a dozen examples, and in the process have suggested that everyone involved in the project is obsessed with political correctness. All of the classroom teachers who wrote the standards and developed the activities are mainstream educators with long experience in the classroom and are highly regarded by their colleagues, by students, and by parents. To be labeled as some sort of left-wing radicals by critics such as Ms. Cheney is an injustice to classroom teachers everywhere." (Letter to the Editor from John Pyne and Gloria Sesso, *New York Times*, February 7, 1995)

Kirk Ankeney, a vice principal in San Diego City Schools, writes: "One of the controversial issues which arose had to do with questions about the

authorship of the standards. . . The error of . . . Rush Limbaugh, John Fonte, and John Leo . . . lay in their contention that the history standards were the creation of one historian (Gary Nash), one university's history department (UCLA), and/or one point of view (liberal). The facts are these: A host of prominent historians were involved, and the teacher-writers were selected from virtually every corner of the United States (off the top of my head I'm remembering teachers such as David here in California, Mark up in Washington, Earl in Chicago, Helen there in Michigan, Gloria on Long Island, John in New Jersey, Melvin in Philadelphia, Bill over in Maryland, Dan down in Florida, Angeline in Colorado, and John in New Mexico), and we were inclusive of the diversity of this country; the National Center for History in the Schools, based at UCLA, was the recipient of the federal grant to oversee the standards development process—not the UCLA History Department; and last, there was no philosophical or political litmus test or paper screening applied to the educators who came to work on the standards. On this latter issue, as I have stated elsewhere, the topic of one's political beliefs never came up during the two-and-a-half years I was associated with the project. No one asked: if they cared they were masterful at hiding it. (*San Diego Union*, November 21, 1994)

Are the standards "politically correct"? A perusal of the guidelines will show that the historical thinking skills and subject matter understandings that young learners should acquire are presented in a series of shaded boxes, arranged under broad statements such as "Students should understand the course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people." These statements plus the shaded boxes represent the standards per se. The militant critics have had almost nothing to say about these thinking skills and understandings. Rather they have concentrated their fire on the "examples of student achievement" that are presented in connection with each of the shaded boxes. These exemplars were included to link the topical standards to concrete classroom strategies for implementing them and to give teachers a wealth of practical ideas to flesh out the somewhat generalized guidelines. These suggestions for lighting up classrooms with active learning are spelled out at Grades 5-6, 7-8, and 9-12. For example: "Develop a classroom newspaper profiling the leading scientists of the 19th century and explain how advances in science affected society. What were the obstacles scientists faced? How did new scientific discoveries improve the health of children and adults?"

The critics have focused almost entirely on these illustrative classroom activities, targeting for attack a handful of the nearly 2,600 items presented in the U.S. and world history standards combined. Their main ploy has been to count up the number of times particular names appear in the volumes, then express outrage that, for example, such and such an African-American figure is "mentioned" more times than such and such a president or general. The standards themselves, that is, the shaded boxes, include very few names at all since they focus on broad ideas, turning points, economic transformations, revolutions, religious movements, and so forth. By this selective and devious nose-counting the critics come to the conclusion that, as Cheney

charges, "it's hard to get into the books if you're a white male." The *New York Times'* lead editorial on February 13th, entitled "Maligning the History Standards," aptly states: "Ms. Cheney . . . ridicules through misrepresentation. Enumeration—McCarthy 19, Edison 0—would make sense if the standards were a textbook, a compendium of all important facts. But the sample lessons, from which the numbers are taken, are just that. Samples. Teachers would fill in the blanks—meeting the standard that calls for examining the impact of invention by discussing Edison."

In fact, most of the names referred to in the exemplars in the U.S. book are white males only because this group has held political, economic and cultural power overwhelmingly throughout our country's history. Senator Slade Gorton of Washington has pronounced the history standards "not recoverable" (Senate Appropriations Committee, March 1), but in his hostile speech on the floor of Congress on January 18 he made almost no reference at all to the standards themselves. Rather he lampooned and misrepresented a number of the exemplars.

The standards books, it should be emphasized, are not textbooks, nor do they present extended narrative essays on all the knowledge American kids should have. The U.S. volume, for example, calls for studying military leadership, North and South, in the Civil War, but it does not provide lists or biographical sketches of prominent generals. To suggest, as Cheney has, that if Robert E. Lee or George Pickett are not "mentioned" by name in the standards, then teachers and textbook publishers will conclude that they are obligated to eliminate these men from the study of civil war leadership. This is patently silly and an insult to history educators.

Are the standards grim and gloomy? The critics charge that the U.S. book presents young learners with a bleak picture of American history and that the world history book interprets everything in the European past as "evil and oppressive." Cheney points to the presentations of the Ku Klux Klan and McCarthyism as evidence of too much gloomy history. In fact the KKK is introduced in a section on the 1870s when that organization was founded and again in a section on the 1920s when it became a national movement. All references to McCarthyism are presented on two pages in connection with a section on the Cold War era. The KKK is grim indeed, and yes, McCarthyism did involve corrosive innuendoes that ruined the reputations of many Americans. These are somber episodes in American history. But will not students be taught valuable lessons and indeed be uplifted by learning how most Americans put the KKK and McCarthyism behind them? This is not dismal history but dismal history overcome. Can our children endow to their own offspring the ideals of liberty, equality, and justice on which our nation is founded if they never understand that these ideals must be defended against those who would abuse or annihilate them?

The hostile critics do not find the U.S. standards celebratory enough and refuse to recognize that the book is suffused with American reformism—that enduring quest to achieve the ideals set forth in our founding docu-

ments. "What is man born for, but to be a reformer," said Ralph Waldo Emerson. The many teachers who have commended the standards see how they reinforce one of the most important reasons for studying our history: to help students understand how the founding fathers—yes, with all their warts—set forth principles upon which to organize national life. Is it grim and gloomy to say that the struggle to attain these ideals has been painful, sometimes bloody? Is it inadmissible to say that the agenda set two centuries ago is an agenda not fully accomplished? Should we banish Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Ole Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, and Richard Wright's *Native Son* from the classrooms because they present a "grim and gloomy" view of American life that will sap our young people's patriotism? Literature is about triumph and tragedy, lightness and darkness, cowardice and heroism, accomplishment and failure. So is history.

Here are some apt comments from John Hope Franklin, a historian who reviewed the standards: "During the last few weeks I have had the privilege of reading *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience*. It is the most imaginative, creative, and important treatment of the American past for K-12 students that I have ever read. It is not argumentative, but stimulating; not dogmatic, but suggestive; not staid, but refreshing. In my careful reading of it I found not one bit of special pleading and no attack on long-held but not necessarily accurate notions. It opens up many new ways of looking at our past, but it makes no claims other than its insistence that students and teachers alike do their own thinking. In this regard the depth of the generosity of this work is most remarkable." (From a letter to Gary Nash by John Hope Franklin, James B. Duke Professor of History Emeritus, Duke University, dated December 9, 1994)

The critics fume that the world history standards "give no emphasis to Western civilization." Since the book in fact calls upon students to learn about Europe and Europeans in rich detail, especially for the past half millennium, what can the critics mean? Cheney's position is that "if you look over history for the last 500 or 600 years, the rise of the West is the organizing principle...." (*Washington Post*, Nov. 11). Western ascendancy might be one organizing principle for developing a world history curriculum, but we can hardly return to the days when American schools taught the rise of the West as essentially synonymous with world history. Such an intellectual position is no longer tenable among the vast majority of teachers, especially the thousands who know a good deal about the history of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and are eager to share it with their students. World history defined as "Western Civ" and little else could not at this point in the late 20th century be the basis for developing national standards.

When the National Council on History Standards began its work three years ago, it declared that world history standards should be just that--globe-encircling in scope. In accord with that commitment the standards recommend study, not of every culture and dynasty of the past, but the major civilized traditions around the world as well as those large-scale develop-

ments that cut across cultural and social boundaries and that have hemispheric or global significance. Western civilization is presented richly but in regional or global context, not as a closed, autonomous narrative running from Hammurabi to Hitler. University of Chicago historian Hanna Holborn Gray questions the critics who charge that the standards fail to focus on Western civilization. "This is odd," she writes (*Washington Post*, Jan. 29), "since world history presumably must contain more than that of the West and since the West has indisputably been located in and deeply shaped by a larger global history. Its development is incomprehensible outside that context." William McNeill, Professor of History Emeritus, University of Chicago, in Letters to the Editor (*Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 1995), states, "The accusation that the World History Standards exhibit an 'anti-Western tone' is wrong. Had you looked through the volume you ridicule, you would find that classical Greece and Rome, the rise of Christianity and the European Middle Ages are carefully presented and situated in the context of Eurasian and world history. Then beginning with the European discoveries, the standards show how Western leadership of the entire globe commenced and continues to the present. There is no anti-Western bias here; and the roots of our own political institutions in the classical and Christian past are faithfully set forth."

Donald Woodruff, headmaster of Fredericksburg Academy and one of the writers of the world history book explains: "The organizing of the guidelines around eight major areas of history, rather than culture by culture, is precisely designed to encourage teachers and students to consider the interrelations of events in different parts of the world, to compare and contrast human action in different societies, and to contextualize history. Is not this the best way for students to prepare themselves to make sense of the complex, deeply interconnected world in which we live today? Won't students cultivate a deeper appreciation of the power of the democratic and liberal ideas that arose in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries if they investigate the ways in which peoples of Latin America, Asia, and Africa grappled with those ideas in the 19th and 20th centuries?"

Are the standards going to be the new official history? The critics fear that the history standards will become "official knowledge," dictating new textbooks and teacher lesson plans. This assertion ridicules teachers, who are stalwartly independent and fully capable of using these voluntary guidelines as resources, not catechisms. Will publishers follow the standards slavishly? There is no evidence of that. Even more to the point, the standards take an explicit stand against official forms of history. In setting forth critical thinking skills, all three volumes call for students to "differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations." They ask students to "challenge arguments of historical inevitability," to "compare competing historical narratives," and to "evaluate major debates among historians." They urge students to examine historical eras, movements, and transformations from "multiple perspectives." These are hardly prescriptions for an authoritative canned-in-Washington version of the past.

The hostile critics, some of whom want schools to drum into students the "facts" before asking them to think about the past, seem oblivious to the idea that the shift toward an inquiry-based education moves our society further than it has ever been from official history. Until recent decades, historians were drawn mostly from one slice of American society, and they consequently produced a highly selective and therefore unbalanced version of the American and global past. Frances Fitzgerald pointed this out several years ago in her survey of American history textbooks. It is precisely the multi-layered social history of the last generation of scholarship that has transcended semi-official versions of this country's development. The history standards invite students to examine newly uncovered chapters of our past and to consider differing perspectives on social movements, ideologies, political changes, and economic transformations. Moreover, the spectacular explosion of research on the history of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, which William H. McNeill has described as "the central achievement of the American historical profession during the past half century" (*Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 11), has begun to bring into view so much of the human past that was previously enshrouded. The flow of new immigrants into this country is reason enough for all Americans to have a solid world history education that embraces the entire human community.

Educators will be the ultimate arbiters of the history standards books. As teachers have always done with curricular materials, they will consult the guidelines, assess their value, draw from them what they find useful, adapt them to their lesson plans, and leave the rest aside. Reasoned discussion among parents, teachers, and all history educators is much preferred to campaigns of disinformation. To see for themselves, teachers and parents can order the books from the National Center for History in the Schools, 10880 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 761, Los Angeles, CA 90024-4108, Fax: (310) 825-4723.